

Honduras

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Freedom of the Press

Freedoms of speech and of the press are constitutionally protected in Honduras, but the environment for media freedom has worsened considerably in recent years, with a sharp increase in murders and intimidation of journalists. The trend continued in 2013, as journalists reporting on organized crime and corruption worked under difficult conditions, and three media workers were killed during the year. Meanwhile, outgoing president Porfirio Lobo's relationship with the news media grew more hostile. In November, National Party (PN) candidate Juan Orlando Hernández was elected president with a plurality in a disputed vote. His closest challenger, Xiomara Castro, was the wife of former president José Manuel Zelaya, who was deposed in a 2009 coup. Hernández was set to take office in January 2014.

The legal environment for press freedom is problematic. While the penal code's *desacato* (disrespect) provision, which aimed to protect the honor of public officials, was abolished in 2005, other restrictive press laws remain on the books and can be used to punish journalists who report on sensitive issues such as government corruption, drug trafficking, and human rights abuses. In December 2013, journalist Julio Ernesto Alvarado of the often-targeted Globo radio and television network received a deferred 16-month prison sentence after being convicted of criminal defamation for an incident that occurred in 2006.

In June 2013, media owners agreed to self-regulate the portrayal of violence in Honduras, thereby stopping a law proposed by Lobo that would have given the government the ability to regulate content broadcast on national networks. At year's end, however, the National Congress was debating another bill that posed a serious threat to freedom of the press. The proposed Law on Official Secrets and Classification of Public Information would curb Honduras's freedom of information law, which was instituted in 2007. Access to information under the 2007 law is already problematic in practice; the Inter American Press Association stated in May that government officials were refusing to provide basic statistical information. Media watchdogs claimed that the new bill would do even more harm by establishing categories of information that could be classified at the discretion of officials in numerous state agencies.

Community radio stations are not clearly recognized by Honduran law, and they operate under the threat of closure. Such stations, particularly those that carry opposition views, are regularly harassed and persecuted. The founder of the radio station La Voz de Zacate Grande, Pedro Canales, continued to have problems with local landowners in 2013 and received death threats in March. Community radio stations in the Bajo Aguán region and others in the departments of Valle and Choluteca have also been pressured because of their work against mining projects in their areas.

Government pressure and threats continue to limit editorial freedom. In January 2013, Lobo publicly criticized the media for sensationalism in its reporting on violence in the country, and floated the idea of a referendum to break up what he termed media "monopolies." In February, Lobo and Security Minister Pompeyo Bonilla blasted the media over their reporting on the shooting deaths of two youths in the capital, claiming that such coverage was detrimental to the nation's image and social welfare. Self-censorship has been exacerbated by an increase in intimidation and death threats against journalists and their families by both criminal groups and state agents. Journalists report that they cannot freely work in several areas of the country because of organized crime, and large swaths of the two major cities, Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula, are also off limits because of threats from youth gangs.

High levels of violence have made Honduras one of the world's most dangerous countries for journalists. According to the governmental National Human Rights Commission (CONADEH), at least 29 media workers have been killed since the 2009 coup, although in some cases it was unclear whether the murders were directly tied to their work. In June 2013 prominent radio talk-show host Aníbal Barrow was kidnapped, and his charred body was found two weeks later in a lake outside San Pedro Sula. His murder was followed by the assassinations of two other media professionals: cameraman Manuel Murillo in October and reporter Juan Carlos Argeñal Medina in December. All three victims were associated with the Globo media group, which had heavily criticized the 2009 coup that unseated Zelaya. CONADEH documented an additional seven attempted murders of journalists during the year, as well as numerous cases of threats, physical attacks, and harassment. Authorities consistently fail to investigate these crimes effectively, meaning convictions remain rare.

Honduras has at least nine daily newspapers, six private television stations, and five radio stations that broadcast nationally, as well as a large number of community radio stations. Most of the major outlets are owned by a small group of business magnates who have political and commercial interests and exercise considerable control over content. According to a 2013 report by PEN International, the media remain highly polarized, which exacerbates problems such as impunity. About 18 percent of the population had access to the internet in 2013, but poor infrastructure in rural areas limits penetration. Corruption among journalists and government manipulation of state advertising purchases remain common. In January 2013, Lobo pushed legislation through Congress to eliminate a variety of tax benefits enjoyed for decades by the print media sector, sparking protests by journalists.

2014 Scores

Press Status

Not Free

Press Freedom Score

(0 = best, 100 = worst)

64

Legal Environment

(0 = best, 30 = worst)

18

Political Environment

(0 = best, 40 = worst)

31

Economic Environment

(0 = best, 30 = worst)

